Unmarried Fathers' Involvement With Their Young Children

The First Year

Most Newark mothers and fathers want fathers to be involved in children's lives. However, only 30% are married at the time of a birth, and, although most start out as romantic partners, unmarried parents' relationships often deteriorate over time. One year later, only 40% of Newark parents who were unmarried when their child was born are living together.

However, Newark fathers who do not live with mothers are more involved in their children's lives than nonresidential fathers in other cities. They visit more often and are more likely to buy things for children and help mothers with child-related chores.

The quality of his relationship with the mother is the best predictor of a father's involvement with his child, but father's age, having children with other partners, domestic violence, and incarceration history also play important roles. Policies and programs are needed to address each of these issues and to support fathers as they seek to be involved with their children.

Over the past three decades childbearing outside of marriage in the United States has tripled and now includes a third of all births. In Newark, the rate is more than twice that high.[1] This change has increased concerns about fathers' involvement with their children and fueled a federal initiative to encourage marriage. Yet we know surprisingly little about unmarried fathers.

The first large scale examination of unmarried families in American cities[2] suggests that a child's birth may be a "magic moment" for family formation.[3] Most parents of newborns—92%—were either married, living together, or in a romantic relationship, and 84% of those who were unmarried nonetheless described themselves as either cohabiting or romantically involved. However, a year later their number had dramatically declined, to 57%.

This report focuses on unmarried fathers and on the first year after the birth, using data from the Fragile Families Study (FFS). Most unmarried fathers (96% of those in Newark) said they wanted to be involved in their children's lives. We wanted to know how involved unmarried fathers were and what predicted involvement. We also asked whether

unmarried Newark fathers were more or less involved with children than fathers in other cities.

Measures

Fathers' involvement can be assessed in many ways. Economic contributions are the focus of much concern, but other resources are also critical. Indeed, when asked, more mothers endorsed "love and affection" than financial assistance as fathers' most important contribution (64% vs 15%). We chose a variety of measures to assess fathers' involvement, including residing with the mother, providing time or money, visiting the child, and playful or caregiving interactions.

Characteristics of fathers who were unmarried when their child was born

	Newark	Other FFS cities
Father's race/ethnicity		
White	3%	8%
Black	69%	56%
Hispanic	26%	33%
Father born in the U.S.	80%	83%
Fathers' education		
Less than high school	36%	39%
High school	45%	35%
Some college	16%	21%
College degree	3%	4%
Father		
is employed (previous week)	78%	76%
has household income below poverty	30%	34%
has child by another partner	48%	46%
has history of incarceration	35%	35%
has been abusive to mother	15%	13%
used illegal drugs in last 3 months	10%*	15%
says marriage is better for children	79%	77%
says mother is supportive [b]	2.7	2.7
Father's age (years)	26.4	27.3
Father's depression (CES-D score)[a]	7.9*	7.1
Mother wants father to be involved with child	93%	94%
Child is a boy	47%*	52%

* Newark differs significantly from other cities ($p < .05$)
[a] possible score of 0–36
[b] possible score of 1-3

What predicts fathers' involvement? Research suggests that fathers' education, employment, mental and behavioral health, attitudes, and relationship with mothers are all important.[4] In addition, the child's gender[5] and having children by other partners may make a difference.[6] We measured each of these potential predictors.[7]

Residence

Which unmarried fathers were living with their children's mothers one year after the birth? We found that fathers who were older, were not born in the United States, were employed, had no children by other partners and no history of incarceration or of abusing the mother, who reported that mothers were supportive towards them, or whose partners wanted them to be involved with the child were more likely to live with mothers at the end of the child's first year of life.

Unmarried fathers' relationship with mothers

	Newark	Other FFS cities
Unmarried at the time of child's birth	70%*	47%
how many of these were cohabiting	48%	49%
romantically involved	37%	35%
not romantically involved	16%	16%
Unmarried a year after the child's birth	71%*	45%
how many of these were cohabiting	35%*	43%
romantically involved	14%	14%
not romantically involved	50%*	43%
Unmarried at birth and nonresidential at one year	60%*	51%

* Newark differs significantly from other cities ($p < .05$)

Economic Resources

We also wanted to know what distinguished fathers who remained involved and contributed to their children even though they did not live with mothers. We first asked mothers whether nonresidential fathers had agreed to provide child support, through either legal or informal agreements. We found that fathers were more likely to have legal orders if they were U.S. born and reported that mothers were ***not*** supportive towards them. Informal agreements more often existed when fathers were employed, had no history of incarceration or of violence towards mothers, reported that mothers were supportive, or when children were girls.

Fathers may contribute economically whether or not they have support agreements, so mothers were also asked how often fathers purchased items such as diapers, food, toys, clothing, or medicine for children. Fathers who were older, had no children by other partners, had no history of incarceration, or indicated mothers were supportive were more likely to buy things for their children.

Nonresidential fathers also help mothers in other ways, for example, running errands, fixing things, caring for children or taking them to child care or to the doctor. Fathers who helped out in these ways were similar to those who bought for children: they were older, had no children by other partners and no history of incarceration or of violence against mothers, or reported supportive relationships with mothers, and mothers reported they wanted these fathers involved with children. The only surprising finding was that these fathers were less likely to have completed high school.

Father-infant interactions

Interacting with fathers may be as important to children as financial contributions. To interact, nonresidential fathers must first visit their children, so we asked mothers how often in the last month fathers had seen the child: on average, they had visited 10 times. Fathers who saw their children once a week or more were likely to be older, have no children with other partners, be employed, or have no history of incarceration or of violence towards mothers.

We also asked mothers about specific activities fathers engaged in, for example, providing physical care (changing diapers, feeding, and putting the child to bed) or having playful interactions (singing, telling stories, reading, playing games or playing with toys). Fathers with ***less*** education, who had no children with other partners, or reported supportive relationships with mothers interacted more frequently with their infants.

Non-residential fathers' involvement with children one year later

	Newark	Other FFS cities
Father contributes economically		
Legal support order	27%	16%
Informal agreement	30%	39%
Father buys for child [a]	1.3*	1.2
Father helps mother [b]	2.3*	2.3
Father spends time with the child		
Visits (days/month)	13*	10
Visits weekly	53%*	47%
Interacts with child (days/week) [c]	2.6	2.8

* Newark differs significantly from other cities ($p < .05$) after demographics are accounted for

[a] Buys food, clothing, medicine, child care items, etc.; 1=never, 4=often

[b] Helps with errands, child care, taking child places, fixing things; 1=never, 4=often

[c] Changes diapers, feeds, puts to bed, sings, tells stories, reads, plays with toys, or plays games

What predicts unmarried fathers' involvement?	Race	Age	U.S. born	Education	Income	Employment	Incarceration history	Partner abuse	Depression	Drug use	Has children with another mother	Says marriage better for children	Mother supportive	Mother has children with another partner	Mother wants father involved	Gender of child
Relationship at one year																
Married or cohabiting		*	*		*	*	*	*			*		*		*	
Father contributes (if nonresidential)																
Legal support order			*										*			
Informal agreement						*	*	*					*			*
Father buys for the child		*					*	*			*		*		*	
Father helps mother		*		*			*	*			*		*		*	
Father sees child (if nonresidential)																
Visits (days/month)		*					*				*					
Visits weekly		*				*	*	*			*					
Interacts (days/week)				*							*		*			

* $p < .05$ (significant predictor)

Are Newark fathers more or less involved with their children?

How do fathers in Newark compare to fathers in other cities? Unmarried Newark fathers were less likely than those in the other FFS cities to live with the mothers of their one-year-old children. However, this difference can be explained by demographic differences (e.g., education, employment, income, race/ethnicity, immigration, and age) between Newark and other cities; Newark fathers with similar characteristics had rates of co-residence similar to fathers in other cities.

Nonresidential Newark fathers were more likely to have legal support orders and less likely to have informal agreements, but, again, these differences appear to be due to demographic factors. Newark no longer looked different when those factors were accounted for. Newark fathers were as likely to buy things for their children as fathers in the other cities. When matched for demographics, they were ***more*** likely to do so. They were also as likely as other fathers to do errands and chores; again, after other factors were accounted for, they were ***more*** likely to help out.

Newark fathers who were nonresidential visited their children ***more*** often than fathers in other cities. On average, they had seen their children 13 days in the previous month; 53% visited at least once a week. After accounting for other factors, they were 2.7 times more likely to see their children once a week or more. Newark fathers were equally likely to engage in playful or caregiving activities with their children as fathers in other cities; mothers reported that they did so 2-1/2 days each week, on average.

Most of the characteristics that predicted Newark fathers' involvement mirrored the national sample, but there were some differences. Newark fathers who used illegal drugs were also less likely to buy for their children. And Newark fathers saw children more often and were supportive when mothers had no children with other partners.

Summary

Unmarried fathers' involvement with children a year after the birth was predicted by a number of factors. However, neither race nor ethnicity mattered, nor did fathers' income, depression, belief that marriage was good for children, or, in most cases, education. Unexpectedly, when education did matter, having *less* predicted more involvement.[8] And child gender mattered in only one case—fathers of baby *girls* were more likely to have informal support agreements. Otherwise fathers were equally likely to be involved with girls and boys.

What mattered most was father's assessment of the quality of his relationship with the child's mother, specifically, how supportive she was towards him at the time of the birth. Also crucial was whether fathers had children with other partners, his history of incarceration and of violence towards the mother, and, in some cases, his age, employment, and mother's desire to have him involved.

The significance of mothers' attitudes towards fathers can be interpreted in various ways. Mothers who do not want fathers involved may become barriers, either actively or passively discouraging access. Perhaps a mother's attitude reflects an accurate assessment of the father's potential to be a good parent—she may be aware of characteristics we did not capture here. At the time of the birth, very few mothers (6%) said they did *not* want fathers involved, so when this occurs, it may indicate serious issues.

How did unmarried fathers in Newark differ from those in other cities? They were less likely to live with mothers a year after children were born. However, on the positive side, Newark fathers who did not live with mothers were equally or more likely than those in other cities to be involved with their children.

The characteristics we examined account for a only portion of the differences in unmarried fathers' involvement; there is much we do not know. Also, we only looked at involvement one year after the child's birth. This may suggest targets for early intervention, when fathers are still hopeful about being a part of their children's lives. What happens in future years may be of even greater concern and will be the subject of a future report.

Policy implications

These findings support the proposal that improving the quality of the relationship between mothers and fathers may increase fathers' involvement with their children. They point to the need to address domestic violence, and they also underline the impact of incarceration and the need for re-entry programs that prepare inmates for life after prison, including family relationships. Furthermore, they suggest that helping young people delay childbearing might decrease the strain on resources and the conflicting loyalties that interfere with being an involved father, by reducing the likelihood of having children with more than one partner. Finally, programs that support unmarried fathers in their efforts to care for their infants seem likely to encourage more positive involvement.

What Might Increase Fathers' Involvement with Their Young Children?

- Programs to improve the quality of parents' relationships
- Fatherhood programs
- Delayed childbearing
- Re-entry programs that support family relationships

As part of a national study of births in 20 large U.S. cities, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study identified consecutive births in Newark hospitals in the summer of 1999. These mothers and fathers were surveyed at the time of the birth and followed through their child's fifth birthday. This brief was prepared by Michelle DeKlyen, Ph.D., with support from the Fund for New Jersey, the Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey, and the Schumann Fund for New Jersey. To learn more about the national study, see www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/index.asp. For information on Fragile Families in Urban Essex, see www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/newark.asp.

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Footnotes

[1] Association for Children of New Jersey (2006). *Newark Kids Count 2006: A city profile of child well-being*. Newark, NJ: Association for Children of New Jersey. To view online, go to www.acnj.org.

[2] The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is following a cohort of nearly 5000 children born in 20 large U.S. cities. The data presented here are weighted to be representative of births in these cities. The Newark sample (n = 342) represents children born in Newark hospitals in the summer of 1999. For more information about the national study visit www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/index.asp. To learn more about the Newark sample see www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/newark.asp.

[3] McLanahan, S., Garfinkel, I., & Mincy, R.B. (2001). Fragile families, welfare reform, and marriage. Policy Brief #10—2001. The Brookings Institution. Access at www.brook.edu/printme.wbs?page=/es/research/projects/wrb/publications/pb/pb10.htm.

[4] Arendell, T. (1995). *Fathers and divorce*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Carlson, M., McLanahan, S., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2005). Unmarried but not absent: Fathers' involvement with children after a nonmarital birth. Center for Research on Child Wellbeing Working Paper #05-07-FF, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.; Coley, R.L., & Chase-Lansdale, P.L. (1999). Stability and change in paternal involvement among urban African American fathers. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 13, 1-20; Das Eiden, R., & Leonard, K.E. (2000). Paternal alcoholism, parental psychopathology, and aggravation with infants. *Journal of Substance Abuse*, 11, 17-29; Sobolewski, J.M, & King, V. (2005). The importance of the coparental relationship for nonresident fathers' ties to children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 67, 1196-1212; Western, B., Lopoo, L., & McLanahan, S. (2004). Incarceration and the bonds among parents in fragile families. In M. Patillo, D. Weiman, & B. Western (Eds.), *The impact of incarceration on families and communities*. NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

[5] Cooksey, E.C., & Craig, P.H. (1998). Parenting from a distance: The effects of paternal characteristics on contact between nonresidential fathers and their children. *Demography*, 35, 187-200; Harris, K.M., & Morgan, P.S. (1991). Fathers, sons and daughters: Differential paternal involvement in parenting. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 53, 531-544; Marsiglio, W. (1991). Paternal engagement activities with minor children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 53, 973-986; Pleck, J.H. (1997). Paternal involvement: Levels, sources, and consequences. In M.E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development*. NY: John Wiley and Sons.

[6] Carlson, M., & Furstenberg, F., Jr. (forthcoming). The prevalence and correlates of multi-partnered fertility among urban U.S. parents. *Journal of Marriage and Family*; Carlson, McLanahan, Brooks-Gunn (2005); Manning, W.D., & Smock, P.J. (1999). New families and nonresident father-child visitation. *Social Forces*, 78, 87-116, 2000.

[7] Choice of measures was informed by other studies of fathers' involvement. See Johnson, W. (2001). Paternal involvement among unwed fathers. Children and Youth Services Review, 23, pp. 513-536; Carlson, M.J., & McLanahan, S.S. (2004), Early father involvement in fragile families. In Randal Day & Michael Lamb (Eds.), *Conceptualizing and measuring father involvement* (pp. 241-271). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum; Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks Gunn (2005).

To assess father's involvement a year after the birth each mother was asked her relationship with the father (married, living together, romantically involved but not residential, and not romantically involved), whether she had a legal support order, whether she had an informal agreement with father to provide financial support, whether father bought child care items, food, clothes, toys, medicine, or other things for the child (mean rating, 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often), whether father helped her by looking after child, taking child to appointments, running errands, or fixing things around the house (mean rating, 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often), how many days in the past month father saw the child, and how many days a week father played games, read, sang, told stories, played with toys, fed, diapered, or put child to bed (mean number of days). We used mothers' reports for these variables because we had more responses from mothers and were more confident that the data were representative.

The predictor variables were father's race/ethnicity (self-identified as "White," "Black or African-American," "of Hispanic or Latino descent," or other), age, born in U.S., education (less than high school, high school, some college, or college degree), household income (<50% poverty level, <100% poverty, 100-200% poverty, 200-300% poverty, >300% poverty), employment in the week previous to birth, father ever incarcerated, abuse towards mother (mother reports father ever slapped, kicked, hit, cut, bruised, or seriously hurt her), depression (CES-D score), use of illegal drugs (in the three months prior to child's birth), mother or father has child by another partner, father believes marriage is better for the child, mother is supportive of father (mean of father's report that mother was fair/willing to compromise, expressed love and affection, and encouraged or helped father, 1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often), mother wants father involved with child, and child's gender. All predictors were assessed at or near the time of the child's birth except for father's incarceration and partner abuse. Incarceration history was asked at one year, and the abuse measure is a composite of birth and year one answers, because inconsistencies led us to believe single items were unreliable and underestimated prevalence. Parents' relationship at the time of birth also predicted fathers' involvement; including it eliminated some of the socioeconomic predictors of residence at year one but changed few of the findings related to fathers' contributions to or interactions with children.

[8] Although father's education was only significant for helping mothers and interactions with children, in the national sample fathers with less education tended to have better outcomes for everything except marriage and legal support orders. In contrast, Newark fathers with less education were more often married and had more legal support orders but were less likely to buy things, help mothers, or see children.